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THE CURTAIN OF FORGETFULNESS

THE CURTAIN OF FORGETFULNESS

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PREFACE

'THE soul being immortal, and having been born again many times, . . . should be able to call to remembrance all she ever knew; . . . for all learning is but recollection.'

So mused one of the most poetic, most strenuous, most transcendental of ancient Greek philosophers; and though mediæval Provence was dearer to William Lindsey than classic Greece, yet the words of Plato echoed and re-echoed in his mind, to supplement and be absorbed by the Christian chivalric traditions he in his twelfth-century romance, 'The Severed Mantle,' had portrayed so lovingly.

A blending of antiquarian knowledge, poetic charm, dramatic force, and deep insight into the hearts of men, enabled him to draw aside the Curtain of Forgetfulness covering the centuries between us and the brief brilliant era 'when Idealism reigned supreme, with Love, Joy, and Song her counsellors.'

These words, in the preface to 'The Severed Mantle,' caught the attention—in 1910—of an English student who, in the melodious lyrics and graceful sonnets scattered through the clear strong prose of the romance, recognised the unmistakable note of one for whom verse was simultaneously the inevitable language of keen though controlled emotion and the happy exercise of fastidious artistic skill.

'Brown as the summer twilight are your eyes,
Soft as the shadowy dusk, when night is near,

And one by one the hermit stars appear
To bless the blackness of the lonely skies.
Your glance is like the West, where passion dies
And only prayer is left, prayer and the dear
Dream of a Perfect Love. I seem to hear—
When in your eyes I look—the sound arise
Of distant bells tolling the Angelus,
The sound of bells blown by a fragrant breeze.
It is the holy hour when on his knees
The pale monk falls to worship; even thus
My soul would bow, when in your eyes I see
God's star of love that lights eternity.'*

Ignorant of the writer's American nationality or of his previous works, the present critic sent to William Lindsey, care of his London publisher,† a word of welcome, as to some Provençal Crusader come back from the twelfth century to the twentieth as champion of forgotten heroes and to sing the praise of long-dead gracious ladies of the era when 'love first ceased to mean passion; homage of woman grew to be a religion; the joy of life was over all, and song the natural expression of every feeling.'‡

Despite the surprise of discovering the strayed Provençal dreamer to be a Bostonian man of business, some of his English admirers, when they subsequently met him, greeted him half in jest as a reincarnation of his own Raimbaut de Vacqueiras.

* 'The Severed Mantle,' chapter xxxi, 'Songs to Biatritz.'

† Methuen & Co.

‡ Author's Preface to 'The Severed Mantle.' Methuen & Co., London, and The Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston.

The sonnet sequence now introduced to friends and readers on both sides of the Atlantic was no mere sudden caprice, but a deliberate expression of the essential unity of past, present, and future. This, fittingly, is the message William Lindsey has left, both to friends who deplore his death, and to strangers who come newly into the kingdom of his thought.

'The Curtain of Forgetfulness'—and the lifting thereof—whether regarded literally or figuratively, as a personal story of two beings through many centuries, or a symbolic drama of the life of the human race, should equally charm the sympathetic reader who will recognise in each of these fourteen-line romances a remarkable power of concentration, a vividness bespeaking the novelist and dramatist who was also a scholar and man of the world.

If a jest's prosperity depends on the ear of him that hears it, so in poetry the reader's personality is the instrument upon which the poet plays. Therefore inevitably the degree of enjoyment must depend largely on the reader's own capacity. To those to whom ancient Corinth, mediæval Provence, 'old Toledo,' Renaissance Italy, the England of the Wars of the Roses, the Versailles of Louis Quatorze, are already familiar, the sonnets gleam as a mirror in which their own past seems reflected. Yet so clear-cut are the pictures, so human the characters—ranging from the primitive cave-dweller to the eighteenth-century columbine—that the sonnets contain within themselves everything necessary to the understanding of them. Moreover, there are several so independent

of place and time that they would be significant even if isolated from their context.

For combined reticence and poignancy, perhaps the most outstanding is the twenty-third, with its pathos of inexorable barriers and its dignity of resignation,—

'When you were born too late and I too soon.'

It is best to read the sonnets in the order marshalled by their writer; for although each one is complete in itself, they were fashioned as the chapters of a connected story, in which a thousand years is but a day, and the glory of Spring, the gloom of Autumn, the enchantment of starlight or dawn, the quivering realities of ecstasy or anguish, meet and mingle in an organic whole.

Throughout all the sonnets, whether set near or far, in a dewy English garden or beneath Indian or Grecian skies, whether the lover wins or loses, is blessed or scorned, there throbs through each episode an unquenchable vitality, a proud constancy, and a joyousness the stronger for having faced and challenged sorrow.

'When Memory lifts the curtain there's a breath
Sweet as the fabled Rose of Paradise;'

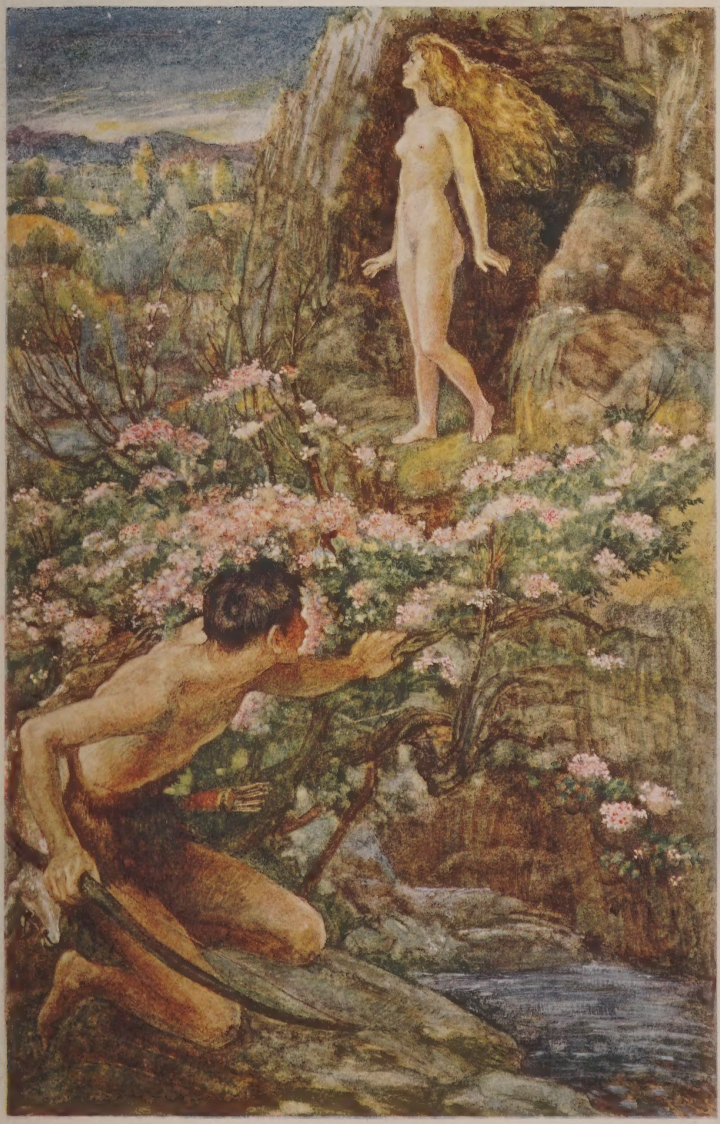
and, seen retrospectively, sacrifice no longer is tragic nor separation final.

'Earth's passing joy or penitential fire,' fulfilment or frustration, defeat or victory, all merge into that supreme 'Now' in which the triumphant spirit realises love as everlasting.

E. M. T.

SOMETIMES, Dear Heart, the hand of Memory,
That I may feel life's solitude the less,
Lifts the thick curtain of forgetfulness,
And glimpses of the past are granted me—
The long, long past when Fortune made me free
To live my little lives, with love to bless,
With fame my lot, or sorrow and distress,
But always 'tis your face and form I see.
You came in many guises. In your mirth
You mocked me, loved me, murdered me; were sad
And gay in turn. But I was always glad
To find you waiting on this sun-blessed earth.
Through many incarnations lives the bliss
Of your embrace, the rapture of your kiss.

DO you remember? Life was newly born
When first we met. Vacant was every hill
And through a valley, flower starred and still,
I scattered dew drops, rubied by the dawn.
Upon my back I bore a mottled fawn,
Weary and thirsty from the chase and kill,
I knelt beside a brook, I drank my fill,
Looked up and saw you through a blossoming thorn.
You stood before the entrance of your cave,
Framed by its blackness, vestured by the air.
So smooth and sweet you were I did not care
For any wound your furious fingers gave.
I caught, I clung to you, and you were mine,
So Fate first made our lives and loves entwine.



WHEN next we met you were a shepherdess.
One April morn you led your bleating flock
Over the meadows to a mossy rock
Which hid you from me and the sun's caress.
Your feet were brown and bare, yet, none the less,
You seemed a goddess, and your tattered frock
A silken robe, and you were used to mock
At my meek love, and laugh at my distress.
I was a goatherd. On my pleading pipe
I long had played to you from far away,
But something made me bold that April day.
A wood nymph whispered to me 'love is ripe.'
I know a lark was singing, high and sweet,
When first I knelt and kissed your dewy feet.

DO you remember when, in old Provence,
I was your troubadour, and all forlorn—
A nightingale, his breast against a thorn—
I sang your praises, hungry for a glance?
And when you smiled, what cared I for the chance
That your grim-visaged lord might turn from scorn
To hatred, and my gory head adorn
His gloomy courtyard, spitted on a lance?
Do you remember when at last he found
You, cradled in my arms? 'Twas black midnight,
His red torch woke us, wearied with delight.
He was in armour, and no slightest wound
My dagger made. Together we met Death,
My white lips perfumed by your passing breath.

BLUE sky above, an azure sea below,
A broken ring of shining golden sand;
A cypress grove by vagrant zephyrs fanned,
A fragrant isle of Greece we used to know.
Upon a hill like banks of spotless snow
The marble gleams, and here you, patient, stand,
While I, the chisel in my eager hand,
Am carving your fair image, blow on blow.
Nude are you, and the amorous Sun God smiles
Upon your limbs' rare beauty, and your breast
Is shadow fanned and wind caressed.
Your loveliness my trembling hand beguiles.
But what care I for fame or failure's smart
With your fair image graven on my heart?

I FACE you, seated in a carven chair—
'Tis Venice, and I hear the ceaseless sound
Of water, lapping like a thirsty hound;
Through the high window pallid moonbeams stare.
Tall candles on the table flood and flare
Like fitful fires on a battle ground.
They light your golden tresses jewel bound.
Your lips show triumph, but your eyes despair.
You placed the dark drug in my cup, I know.
I wonder why you wearied of my love,
And, wearied, why you bent my face above,
And, whispering 'farewell sweetheart, ere you go,'
Upon my lips, fast growing cold and white,
Pressed that last kiss, Death yielding to Delight.

A SHIVERING city doomed to fire and sack . . .
I stand war-weary in the market place,
With other captains, loathing the disgrace
Of lust and loot, the cowardly attack
On men defenceless, and on maids who lack
An arm to guard them from a foul embrace.
The oath, the shriek, the prayer for Heaven's grace
Are mingled while the red flames flare and crack.
The spoil is heaped before us; wan and cold
The women huddle in a frightened heap;
You stand among them and you do not weep,
But hold a dagger, and I scorn the gold
When in your eyes I look, and your despair
Has vanished when I choose you for my share!

TWILIGHT, a pool which mirrors the young moon
Between the lotus blossoms on its breast.
Fragrance, the bamboo branches are at rest
For the drugged wind has fallen in a swoon.
The distant temple bell is importune,
But I heed not. What care I for its hest?
My heart's a temple waiting for its guest.
I know you haste and will be with me soon.
I neither hear nor see your flying feet,
Just as my soul is vexed with vague alarms
Out of the night you float into my arms.
You cling so close I feel your warm heart beat.
We found among the flowers, cold and white,
One blood-red lotus, drunken with delight.

WHAT was your secret that I kept for you
Though questioned by the thumb-screw and the [rack
Until, by torture spent, the world went black,
And, faint almost to death, I nothing knew?
When o'er my couch you bent, the bitter dew
Of pain bedrenched me. On my furrowed back
I lay, watching the sunbeams golden track
From the barred window, with its strip of blue.
What was your secret? Were you wrong or right?
I did not care, you were so beautiful.
I still can feel your hand so soft and cool
Upon my brow. I still thrill with delight,
Remembering how you whispered, with a kiss,
'For every pang I pledge an equal bliss.'

'TWAS long ago—the golden days of Spain,
In old Toledo, and amid the gloom
Of monastery shades, I'd lost the bloom
Of youth, the light of holy heaven to gain.
'Twas April, and the sunbeams following rain,
Streamed in my cell, whose thick walls were the tomb
Of earthly joys, and left my heart no room
Save hope of glory, won by toil and pain.
Yet, on that April morning as I peered
Between the iron bars that shut me in,
I saw you at your window, and the sin,
So bitter sweet of passion my heart seared.
I kept your lovely image in my breast
Until they laid my wasted form at rest.

WHY were you silent, Sweetheart? Tell me why
You would not answer me that dreadful night
I found you standing, tall, and still, and white
Before the flickering fire? Why did you cry
Upon my entrance, and why did you try
To hide the burning letter from my sight?
Whose was the letter? Why were you afright?
I ne'er had doubted you nor played the spy.
Was it Count Raimon or the blue-eyed squire
Who sang so sweetly? I remember well
How, when you shook your head and would not tell,
Rage maddened me. Oh God! Before the fire
I see you lie, dead guardian of your note,
My finger marks upon your pulseless throat.

DO you remember when I won my race
At proud Olympia? I'd loved you long,
But one of many. Passionate and strong,
My blood turned water and I begged for grace
To gain a smile from your enchanting face.
I see all plainly now, the eager throng,
The hot, brown track, the runners lithe and young,
The breathless struggle for the winner's place.
Back to old Corinth, eagerly I came,
The olive crown placed proudly on my brow.
I entered through the city wall laid low
In honour of one who had brought her fame.
But what cared I for all she could impart—
I found you'd oped the gateway to your heart.

YOU were of York and I of Lancaster,
Only red roses in my garden grew
And only white your father's pleasance knew.
Between us stretched black woods of pine and fir
And darker still the clouds of hatred were
That hid your life from mine. Yet some bird flew
High through the air where skies were soft and blue
And bore my love your waiting heart to stir.
Do you remember when you fled with me—
The wild night ride, your arms around my waist,
The shot, the pounding hoof-beats crying 'haste,'
The big roan 'neath us, galloping fast and free?
And as we rode my bleeding shoulder pressed
A bright red rose upon your snowy breast.

YOU were the Tourney Queen, and lifted high
Above the dusty lists, upon a throne.
Your robe was cloth of gold, and yet it shone
Less bright than your bronze hair against the sky.
The sky seemed grey so azure was your eye,
And my fond heart saw but your form alone,
A royal rose in a dull garden grown
Whose blooms served but your grace to glorify.
I'd tumbled many a good knight in the dust,
But one was left, and fearing not defeat,
I thought to place the prize before your feet.
Spurring my charger down the lists I rushed,
But, toward your face I gave a fatal glance,
And fell, unhorsed by a relentless lance.

I MEASURE time by neither days nor hours,
I never watch the dial in the sun;
I care not how the silent sands may run,
Nor what the clocks strike in the belfry towers.
The Winter snows may change to Summer flowers,
The green of Spring to Autumn, gray and dun,
But all alike to me are years begun
Or ended, with their suns and shades and showers.
When you are with me 'tis Life's perfect day—
There is no time. But when you leave my side
The years drag on, a dark and sullen tide;
Each moment is a month with you away,
And when I see your blessed face again,
An age has passed of solitude and pain.

WE played, a Harlequin and Columbine,
At gay Versailles. I have no skill to paint
Your loveliness. I know you were no saint,
Although your dainty figure was divine.
You mocked me when I begged you to resign
The flowery skirt that made the world acquaint
With grace that caused my very soul to faint.
Was it the Duke who took you or—the King?
I acted with you that last fateful night,
When old Versailles was drunken with delight.
Applause, a magic wave, drowned everything.
I did not beg a parting kiss in vain—
But never touched those fragrant lips again.

SPRINGTIME, and morning and a lusty sun,
Turning the melting mist to ruddy gold,
The brooks abrim, the breezes soft and bold,
The hedgerow's waking chorus just begun.
Across the field the first red furrows run,
My gleaming ploughshare cutting through the mould,
A merry madrigal I loudly trolled
Stout hearted till the day's long task was done.
I paused to breathe my horses by the stile,
A red-haired gipsy girl was passing by.
Ardent as Springtime was she, and her eye
Said 'Come! Life's road has many a merry mile.'
I followed you. I could not help but yield,
And left my plough in the unfinished field.

MAIDEN of Ice I called you, long ago,
Because you did not keep a tryst with me,
And granted Love's sweet favours sparingly.
You answered 'easier far is yes than no,
I'll meet you when the morrow's sun is low
Beneath the dark boughs of the cedar tree—
The trysting tree where none can hear or see.
I am no maid of ice I'll have you know.'
All day the storm raged. When I climbed the hill,
Just as the sun was sinking in the West,
I found you 'neath the cedar tree, at rest
Under your shroud of snow, serene and still,
All earthly love, all passion overpast,
You'd kept your promised tryst with me, at last.

WHERE was it that we parted, you and I?
Was it St. Malo where you went your way
And I went mine? It was a dreary day.
A hopeless wind moaned 'neath a sullen sky.
The dusk was gathering, and a gull's shrill cry
Came from the sea. The beach was bare and grey.
Far in the West there shone a fading ray.
In spite of parting your sweet eyes were dry.
Your face was loveless and your lips were white.
Your words were bitter and my curse was loud.
And you, in truth were wrong, and I was proud.
You turned and left me to the lonely night.
I would not follow and I shed no tears
Though we were parting for a hundred years.

IT was a garden and the wall was high,
An English wall, grey lichened, rough and worn,
Walking beneath it on a Summer morn,
I heard you singing, and while passing by,
I answered with a song, hoping to spy
The singer's face, but silence tokening scorn,
I went my way sad-hearted and forlorn,
The sun grown dim and overcast the sky.
Again I passed your garden wall, again
You sang, I answered, and a crimson rose
You, laughing, threw to me, and Heaven knows
How oft I kissed it lingering in the lane.
'Twas all Fate granted me, though waiting long—
A red rose and the memory of your song.

ALWAYS, Dear Heart, you were so beautiful,
But Fate once made you wilful, and a song
Would move you like a charm to right or wrong.
Do you remember when the nights were cool
With moonlight, how young Ambrose tried to pull
Your heart from mine by singing late and long?
I broke his lute and slit his foolish tongue,
And held him up to scorn and ridicule.
You were betrothed to me and he was bound
To Rosa of Amalfi, but I'm sure
He nearly caught you with his tuneful lure.
Have you forgotten how the roses wound
About the cottage that I built to shrine
Your perfect beauty, Dearest Heart of mine?

TWO children in an orchard, long ago—
There was no serpent there, though at our feet
The grass was strewn with apples, ripe and sweet.
At easy fruit, on branches bending low,
You would not look. Do you remember how
The fruit I offered you refused to eat,
But, looking in my eyes, with love replete,
You chose an apple on a topmost bough?
I climbed and clutched it, falling, but your smile
I won and maiden kiss, the very first
To 'suage the fever of my boyish thirst.
How often will your fragrant lips beguile
My sluggish soul some topmost bough to climb,
Mounting to dizzy heights for fruits sublime?

HAVE you forgotten how that juggler—Fate,
Tossing the brittle balls of happiness,
Broke all of them, and mocked at our distress,
When, back to earth you came, alas, too late!
I was a grey-haired Counsellor of State,
You were a princess and each shining tress
Was burnished gold to crown your loveliness—
Grey locks and golden do not match—or mate.
With outstretched hands you, smiling, came to me,
Crossing the cruel chasm of the years.
I was too wise to hope, and spite of tears
We said farewell under a leafless tree
In a dead garden, 'neath a dying moon,
When you were born too late, and I too soon.

I NEVER think of you without a sense
Of perfume, faint, ineffable, divine,
Fragant as wedding garments which recline
In chests of sandal wood, until each dense
White fold of silk is heavy with incense;
A perfume like the breeze from woodland shrine
Where violets sleep, where long, sweet grasses twine,
And silent sunbeams creep with reverence.
When Memory lifts the curtain there's a breath
Sweet as the fabled Rose of Paradise
Which all desire fulfils, and sacrifice
Is sacrifice no more, if Life or Death,
Earth's passing joy or penitential fire
But bring my soul the flower of its desire.

TO-NIGHT, Dear Heart, the curtain opens wide,
And Memory need not bring you back to me;
Now you are mine, your face I plainly see.
Though Time has flowed with never ebbing tide,
You are the same as when I drew aside
The flowering thorn, and saw you standing free
Before your cave, when first you tried to flee,
And in my arms I caught you in your pride.
Sometimes you have not loved me, and a rose
Tossed lightly to me o'er a garden wall
Was all I gained. Yet still what e'er befall
In the dim future that no wisdom knows,
What e'er Fate bring of sorrow or delight,
I'm very sure you love me here to-night.

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